DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 422 590 CS 509 883

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TITLE The Forensic Widow: Reflections on Living with and Assisting a Forensic Director.
PUB DATE 1996-11-00
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association (82nd, San Diego, CA, November 23-26, 1996).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Debate; *Family Involvement; Family Life; *Helping Relationship; Higher Education; Marriage; *Spouses; Teacher Responsibility; *Teamwork
IDENTIFIERS *Debate Coaches; Debate Tournaments; *Spouse Role

ABSTRACT

A number of unique challenges face the spouse of a forensic educator, including the possibility of becoming a forensic widow/widower. The job of a forensics coach is all-encompassing and requires endless hours of dedication, drive, and driving. Trying to keep up on all of the required duties is very time consuming and leaves little time for anything else. The forensics coach spends all but two or three weekends during a school year traveling to tournaments. All of the time alone spent by the spouse who stays at home can leave that spouse lonely and with a lot of responsibility. Some spouses have time available to spend becoming involved in tournaments hosted by their forensic partner, and they may be able to travel with their partner's team or participate in several facets of forensics. One wife assists her husband as much as possible--she drives the vans, listens to practices, serves as a judge, and attends weekly team meetings. If a person is not interested in forensics but wants to avoid the widow syndrome as much as possible, there is a prescription: the couple can decide upon an afternoon and evening that they can deem "non-forensic, non-career." (CR)

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The Forensic Widow: Reflections on Living with and Assisting a Forensic Director

Presented at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association

San Diego, CA

November 23-26,. 1996

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G. Jensen

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

"Hi, my name is Gina Adamo-Jensen, and I am a forensics widow."

There are a number of unique challenges that face the spouse of a forensic educator, including the possibility of becoming a forensic widow/widower (referred to from here out as the forensics widow), dealing with the implications that the forensics profession has for the family members of the participants, and dealing with and selecting the options available to the afore mentioned widow. Equipped with the options, a widow needs to know what to do to avoid the syndrome. In this paper I discuss personal decisions made to circumvent the syndrome in my own life. While I characterize my decisions as being good ones, I also touch on the drawbacks that my decisions hold.

What is the Forensics Widow?

To fully understand the plight of the forensics widow, one must first know exactly what is meant by the term. A respondent to survey research conducted by Littlefield and Sellnow (1992) described forensics with this vivid description, "Try waking up at 6 a.m., having gone to bed at 2 a.m., pouring battery acid down your gullet and then try to stay awake watching Lawrence Welk--that's forensics"(p. 8). This is a very accurate description of a job that for its employees, is more a way of life than an occupation. The job of a forensics coach is all encompassing, and requires endless hours of dedication, drive,

and driving! Forensics coaches have classes to teach, paper work to complete, research to do, countless meetings and practices to hold, and an immeasurable number of vans to drive, along with all of the countless other tasks that they perform each week. Trying to keep up on all of the required duties of a coach is very time consuming and leaves little time for anything else. That is where the forensic widow comes in to play. The forensic widow is the spouse of the forensics educator. A spouse is so named because of the enormous amount of time that their husband/wife spends on the job, leaving them feeling that they have been widowed. The forensic coach can spend all but one to three weekends during a school year traveling to tournaments. The widow is in turn left to fend for his/herself for the remaining occupied weekends. A widow should also expect that some holidays will be spent away from their spouse. Easter, Halloween, and Valentine's Day are holidays that are frequently missed. With Easter holding the most significance for many people and being the holiday that the forensic educator will miss almost every year, thanks to fraternity, AFA-NIET or CEDA nationals always coming at the exact same time. All of this time alone, while understood by the widow, can leave the spouse that stays at home lonely and with a lot of responsibility. Many spouses handle their husband/wife's occupation in a number of different ways, including refusing to become a widow. This aspect is further discussed later in the paper. For now, one must consider the effect that a forensics job has on the widow.

Impact of the Forensics Profession on the Widowed

The forensic profession has an unique impact on those who share the life of a forensic professional. While some research addresses the needs and experiences of the professional, less attention, if any, is paid to the impact of forensics on the people close to the forensic educator. Many times people pay attention to the forensic professional and all but ignore that person's spouse. I have on a number of occasions been on a tournament with my husband when we encounter of his colleagues and nine times out of ten I am ignored me. Many times the person will not even acknowledge my existence, placing his/her sole focus on my husband. People on my husband's team also speak of our apartment and car as if they only belonged to him. I have heard these statements a number of time: "Let's go to Scott's" or "Maybe Scott will give us a ride in his car." While this problem is only a matter of politeness and word choice, there are other problems that impact those close to a forensic educator.

Those close to a forensic educator are also impacted in a number of different ways with other problems, besides the politeness problem. For instance, due to the incredibly busy schedule that the forensic coach must manage, a spouse usually has little time to spend with their partner, aside from a few minutes in the morning and a little bit of time in the evening. When one compares the free time of a forensic coach during the week to the free time of a non-coach, the difference is startling. Most business people end their day at 5 p.m.,

allowing for a minimum of at least five or six hours in the evening that can be spent with family. The forensic widow learns to cherish all of the available time with their spouse and attempts to make most of it quality time, not wanting to waste a minute. Even though the time of a forensics educator is limited, the options of the forensics widow are not non-existent.

Options for the Forensic Widow

The forensics widow, in many cases can choose, at least in part, to what extent s/he is willing to be widowed. Some spouses have more flexibility than others, but all spouses can limit the time that their partner spends away in one way or another. Some forensic widows have a job that is demanding and unbending. These people are more limited in their options than people with less rigidity built into their schedule. Their choices are often limited to a non-travel alternative. If their forensic partner hosts tournaments, this is an ideal way to get involved and interested in a forensic spouse's work. Tournament hosting requires a great deal of preparation. A spouse can help his/her coaching mate by calling people in the community to judge, collating ballots, helping schedule the tournament, writing limited preparation topics, and so on. Given that the list of things to do for a tournament is pretty lengthy, a willing spouse should be able to find a number of things that s/he is interested in doing. A person with limited time can also make an effort to learn about forensics and the events in which his/her spouse's team competes. This allows the spouse to assist him/her in

listening to practices, thus cutting down on the amount of time that the forensic educator has to spend in practices. It also serves to acquaint you with his/her other love. Still other options exist for those with grueling schedules. These people can support their mate in any of the public forums that their husband/wife may have, whether it be a audience debate or an individual events showcase.

Another possibility exists for those people whose schedules are more flexible. These lucky individuals can actually travel with their partner's team. Traveling allows a person to take back most of the time lost when the spouse is away. This also benefits the couple because they can experience the sights and different subcultures that our country offers with one another. This option is more open to some than it is to others, but I would suggest that even if a person has to take vacation time to do so, that they see the sights of the United States on a university van at least once a year, or as much as possible.

For those fortunate to have a lot of flexibility in their schedules, like myself, the options are almost limitless. A person can participate in several facets of forensics. For instance, a person with a lot of available time can not only listen to practices, but they can help to unofficially coach their partner's team. They can help to run tournaments, judge at other tournaments, and even help to drive the van. Depending on the would-be widow's schedule, s/he can even attend team meetings, and if his/her attendance is regular enough s/he may be

allowed to participate in team decision making. Some widows may even achieve a non-spouse status, meaning that when a spouse visits their other half's team on an occasional basis, then the students are extra polite and act as one would on the rare occasion that they met their boss's wife/husband. On the other hand, if a person attends meetings, tournaments, and get togethers often enough, they are treated like one of the gang. Everyone is relaxed and acts like themselves around the spouse, treating the relationship just like they would treat any other inner-squad relationship. Participating in forensics in these ways allows for total emersion of oneself into something that one's companion loves. Some people may want to exercise these options, but are faced with the obstacle of not knowing much about forensics. The solution to this is easy, a person does not have to hang around a forensics team long to hear them talk at length about the genre in which they compete, and if this leaves a bit of a gap, I am sure that one's spouse would be more than happy to further explain. All in all, there are many different ways and many different levels at which a person can participate in forensics and avoid being a widow.

If a person is not interested in forensics, but wants to avoid the widow syndrome as much as possible, there is also a prescription for them. The couple can decide upon an afternoon and evening that they can deem, non-forensic, non-career day. This allows the pair to spend quality time together in what ever way they see fit. They can also pick out weekends in which the

forensic educator opts not to travel. Depending on the project, a coach can also turn over projects that are less important or that require less thought, to an assistant, graduate student or a team member. This also helps to free up the day of the busy forensicator. It is important that a forensic coach decide the level of involvement at which s/he wishes to be involved and then consult with their mate to be certain that they are both in agreement. Being a part of the decision making process helps to make the non-forensicator feel included. Widows have to choose the level of involvement at which they are interested in being involved, and then fill any spare together time that they have with quality time. When spouses are not together they should make it a practice to talk on the phone at least once a day while the other is away.

My Story

Having looked at the options that are available to the forensics widow, I now turn to the ways in which I avoid becoming a widow. I do a number of different things to assist my husband. Fortunately, my situation is such, at this current time, that I have a very flexible schedule. The prescription to which I subscribe is total emersion. Having competed once myself, I developed a love for forensics before I married my husband. I too had caught the forensics bug and traveled every available weekend. Having been there myself, I understand why my husband travels most weekends, and I enjoy being able to go along with him. When I competed, I debated and did individual events, so I

already had a knowledge of both major aspects of forensics. This allowed me to jump into judging much easier than my non-competing, non-forensic counterparts.

Besides judging, I do a number of other things to assist my husband. I help unofficially to coach his team. This "job" includes listening to practices, fund raising, anything needed to prepare the students for an upcoming tournament, as well as helping to get ready to host a tournament. As mentioned above, preparing to host a tournament requires a lot of preparation, all of which I am able to do. I help to schedule the tournament, I sometimes help write limited preparation topics, I have collated ballots, solicited judges, reserved rooms as well as the many other necessities of tournament administration. Even though my schedule is flexible, it is often times full until it is time to get on the van. Busy days not withstanding, I try to help my husband as much as possible so that I can help to reduce his enormous workload.

Once on our way to a tournament, I try to begin assisting him as soon as possible. I drive the vans whenever I can, hoping to reduce the time that he has to spend behind the wheel. I also try to drive long amounts of time in hopes that he does not have to drive at all, because most of the time he has only had a couple of hours of sleep the night before due to his workload. Once at the hotel, I will assist him by listening to some of the practices that need to be heard. As stated above, each time that I go to a tournament, I always judge and when I am not judging, I

work in the tab room. Working in the tab room is somewhat unique for the spouse of a coach, because you do not see too many husbands or wives that do so. For me, it is something that I enjoy doing very much and it often times allows me to work with my husband.

Besides traveling and assisting at home, I also have made myself a part of the team. I attend the weekly meetings, I voice my preferences for where I would like to eat on a tournament, and I have become friends with my husband's team members. All of this has allowed them to see me as a part of the team. I am even allowed to vote on issues and be a part of the decision making process. I am sure that there are other spouses who are even more involved than I am, but I do what I can to stay involved. I really enjoy still being a part of a collegiate forensics team. It helps my husband, it helps the team and it allows me to feel like I am still involved with forensics, even though I no longer compete and I am not an official coach.

Even though I thoroughly enjoy being involved with my husband's forensics team, there are negative implications to the choices that I have made. First of all, when you travel with the forensics team for a number of weekends in a row, you are forced to do all of the things that you would normally do within a week in two days, including working in the evening before starting other tasks. This can wear a person out, particularly when s/he has a lot to do each week. It forces a person to try to get things done ahead of time or it forces the procrastinator to have

marathon working sessions. Traveling can also affect a person's job. Many jobs will hire you under the auspices of traveling some, but not realize the impact of your absence until after you have the job. This can cause you to be held back from promotions or pay raises. It can also keep you out of your boss's favor. Further, on the days that you are in town, you know that you are guaranteed to have to work, because as far as your boss is concerned, you have just had four days off. This essentially means that you do not get any days off until Christmas time or the summer months. While my own boss is pretty understanding, I have had other bosses who were not at all sympathetic. I also suffer from the "you have already had days off syndrome" at times, although thankfully not often. With both my husband and I being so involved in forensics, it also makes it hard for us to meet anyone that is not associated with forensics. Further, we do not have time to make friends on the two days that we are in town because we are too busy catching up. I find myself at times thinking, "Now there is a person that I would like to be friends with, once things slow down." Since we have so little free time in which to make friends, get togethers often center around the forensics team. Scott and I are not from Louisiana, so when we moved here, we left all of our friends and family behind. This adds to our inability to have non-forensics gatherings. We have found that it is often hard to keep forensics out of our personal life. Being an active forensic wife has its drawbacks, but the drawbacks do not nearly compare to all of the benefits that I

receive from being so involved with forensics and my husband's professional life.

Conclusion

When one looks at the life of a forensics coach, it becomes clear to see that there are a number of challenges that face the spouse of a forensic educator. That person must decide if they want to live the life of a forensic widow or become a forensic participant, as well as the level of involvement at which they are comfortable. Further, a widow must deal with the implications that come with being married to a busy forensicator. A person can choose how they want to handle being married to a forensic person. I have shown the decisions that I have made and the ways that I assist. Further, we have seen that all choices have implications that must be weighed. Being married to a forensic educator is definitely different than the life that my parents or friends have, but it is a fun way for me to spend time with my husband, while still accomplishing things. As far as being tired is concerned...well, we only live once anyway.

Works Cited

Littlefield, R. & Sellnow, T. (1992). Assessing competition and stress: The perceived effect of tournament atmosphere on students and coaches. National Forensic Journal, 10, 8.